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# THE BEGINNINGS OF THE ART OF “BEL CANTO”

REMARKS ON THE CRITICAL HISTORY OF SINGING

By GIULIO SILVA

THAT period in the history of Italian music which is called “the golden age of *bel canto*” is not marked by exact boundaries; it embraces a span of approximately two hundred years, from the middle of the seventeenth century to the middle of the nineteenth.

It was called thus because the singers and composers of the time were devoted, first and foremost, to the pure musical beauty of melody and the singing voice; that is to say, the artist’s inspiration drew its highest potency of expression from the musical properties of the human voice as perfected by all the resources of the art of song. Thus lyricism attained its loftiest heights in Italy, through the efforts of composers and singers, with the culminating splendor of the school of *bel canto* in the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth.

The historical preparatory period of this golden age was long, whereas the course of its decadence was rapid indeed. The period of preparation was long because it punctually followed the evolution of musical art among the Mediterranean peoples—having its origin, that is, in the musical art of the Hellenes; contrariwise, the period of decadence was extremely short, because it was occasioned by a phenomenon of conquest—the intellectual domination of Germano-Celtic culture over the Greco-Latin culture of the Mediterranean belt.

It is said, and may also be read in many books, that *bel canto* really originated with Giulio Caccini, who is considered by many to be the founder—the inventor, so to speak—of the aria for a solo voice with instrumental accompaniment, and with the establishment of the melodrama through the initiative of the Florentine *camerata* of the counts Bardi di Vernio, in which shine refulgent the names of Emilio Del Cavaliere, Jacopo Peri, Vincenzo Galilei, and that of Caccini himself, this being in the closing years of the sixteenth century and the opening of the seventeenth. This means, that the origin of *bel canto* is attributed to the two

characteristic institutions of the seventeenth century, namely, the aria for solo voice and the recitative style. This is not accurate; these two modes of artistic expression, which gave the art of *bel canto* an opportunity to develop and establish itself rapidly within the brief space of little more than a century, were neither the creation of a moment nor the invention of the artists named above. On the contrary, their adoption and development by the world of art were preceded by long periods of preparation in the foregoing centuries.

Commencing with Hellenic art and coming down gradually until the sixteenth century, we find evidences of a continuous evolution in the spirit and forms of musical art leading us uninterruptedly step by step to monodic song and the recitative of the seventeenth century.

The final aim of the art of singing is to make of the human voice a potent agent of musical emotion, for when a human being is musically moved, he feels and communicates his emotion more strongly than in his usual psychological state.<sup>1</sup> Hence, the evolution of our art may be considered as essentially the evolution of the means employed by artists to further that aim. On the other hand, the varied impressions one experiences and which are expressed through the medium of these musical means, remain fundamentally invariable throughout the ages, just as the human psyche is invariable. Therefore, during the ages there has not been an evolution of human consciousness, but only an evolution of the means of expression, and it is the transformation of these means which we ought to study in order to understand the evolution of the art of song from the times of Hellenic culture down to the Renaissance, the epoch immediately preceding the establishment, in definite form, of *bel canto*.

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By comparing the means of expression of the plastic arts (architecture, sculpture, painting) with the means of expression of the musical arts (poetry, dance, and music—properly so-called—

<sup>1</sup>By reason of a wrong interpretation of these facts it has always been said that music expresses feelings. On the contrary, music does not express *per se* any feeling whatever, but simply induces in man a psychological state that makes him feel and express the emotions themselves in the highest degree. Aristotle, a profound psychologist, had already observed this fact and asserted that music awakens in the hearer and executant a "katharsis," that is, a state of mind extraordinarily favorable to the agitation which any impressions may arouse in him, and to its manifestation. On these phenomena the art of song has been based from time immemorial, this art thus being essentially a lyric art.

either vocal or instrumental), we shall perceive that the combination of lines and the combination of colors in the plastic arts finds its perfect parallel in the musal arts in those combinations of notes which we term rhythmic accent and melodic line. In the former, the sole medium of communication is the sense of sight; in the latter, the chief medium of communication is the sense of hearing, the sense of sight occupying a very subordinate position, as in the dance-pantomime, which constitutes (according to Aristotle) the transition from the plastic arts to the musal arts. Ancient Greek art, having reached heights thitherto unattained with the arts which employ the line without color, these being architecture, sculpture and design, likewise reached the highest perfection in the musal arts through the medium of rhythm, both in the dance and in poetry; both of these employ melody as an auxiliary, not as a sovereign means of expression, just as color found employment in the plastic arts, in a general way, as a purely decorative device. Plato, for example, does not concede an expressive significance to melody, and therewith condemns the use of purely instrumental music in which melody is the absolutely predominant element, while the rhythmic element can never, by reason of the very mechanicalness of the instrument, arrive even distantly at the perfection to which one can attain by means of the voice, and more especially with words set to music. Precisely for these reasons Plato himself says that "in song the rhythm and the words are of principal importance, the tones of the least" —meaning the melodic succession of the tones, or (as we say) the motive. The evolution of Greek musical art was therefore essentially one of rhythm. In the archaic epoch preceding Homer, the Hellenes possessed an established patrimony of melodies, of musical motives, which they called *nomoi* (laws), perhaps because they were employed in chanting the sacred and civil ordinances, perhaps because they were rules for the employment of music in definite forms. In either case, melody did not serve to lend expression to the words, but solely as a decorative element. With the inception of lyric poetry the human voice began to discover continually intensifying means of expressiveness in the rhythm of the verses; new melodies were invented, but the strophic form of the poems apprizes us that melody, as in the archaic *nomos*, continued to function as a decorative element. The earliest forms of choral music, the cyclic choruses of the dithyrambus, equally exhibit the triumph of rhythm, for the song was united with dancing, whereas the melody continued in its purely decorative function. Many ancient poet-musicians of Greece were

celebrated as inventors of rhythms, of metres—not as inventors of expressive melodies. The *melopoios* was an inventor of beautiful melodies, but they did not possess the function of emotional expression. This function was preëminently reserved for the rhythm, the masculine element (as the Greeks called it) of music. Pathos was never generated by the melody, but unquestionably by rhythm; at the very most (after Aristotle, that is, later than the fourth century B.C.), ethos was attributed not alone to the rhythm, but also to the so-called harmonies, namely, the tonal modes—that is to say, to only one of the fundamental elements of melodic expression; this was a rudimentary principle of coloristic musical expression, so much so, indeed, that they began then to use the word *cromos* (color) in defining the so-called chromatic genera and certain shades of intonation proper to certain genera of melody. But it was not genuine and veritable melody, constant in all its expressive elements. In the Greek tragedies the author indicated, at most, the mode (that is, the scale) in which the melody of a poetic phrase was to be executed; very rarely did he indicate the notes of the melody itself. It is extremely doubtful whether the very few tragic melodies handed down to us in writing were certainly invented by the author of the tragedy; many were probably the invention of some interpreter, successions of tones which this latter, or possibly the accompanying citharist, retained in memory. On the other hand, what took on a fixed form was the strophic melody, the choral melody, like the hymns, and precisely because, in them, the melody had a decorative artistic quality like the color and the polychrome marbles of statues and edifices.

The Greek singer, then, drew his emotional influence more from the accents and the rhythm of his voice than from the elements of expressive color. That is why we find, in the history of Greek art, no trace whatever of a vocal training for singers in the sense of our own.

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However, in the progress of the evolution of musical art we are able to perceive that melody in song gradually assumes a more and more expressive character.

In Gregorian Chant we find embryonic forms of “intoned recitation” in which the form of the melody is none other than one wherein the singer, within the limits of his vocal compass and

range of intonation, can endue it freely with an expressive vocal coloration according to his own temperament.

Song, which increasingly continued to draw its means of expression not only from rhythm, but also from tone, engendered in artists the need for developing the musical quality in the voices of singers; that is, from this point of view, it was not felt to be satisfactory to let the individual give merely what his simple natural instincts permitted, but a need was felt to develop his gifts by training, to study the most suitable means for correcting the defects and amplifying the good qualities of the voice in order to render it as beautiful as possible, and thus to be in a position to profit by the fine properties of the tone so as to make the melody increasingly expressive through the agency of excellence of interpretation.

The system of solmisation employing the syllables *ut, re, mi, fa, sol, la*, invented and first applied by the monk Guido d'Arezzo in his *Schola Cantorum* in the eleventh century, is, in point of fact, one of the earliest results of this search after melodic expressiveness, of the striving towards an improvement of musical coloration through the medium of the voice. Guido d'Arezzo's six syllables were not invented to give names to the notes; that is to say, for many centuries they did not possess the significance at present attributed to them; they formed a system of solfeggio, of vocal and musical training, based on the hexachord, which is a section of six tones of the scale. Let us take note, however, of this highly important fact—that solfeggio was invented and for numerous centuries employed as a method of vocal training, and that its appearance in the eleventh century marked the dawn of expressive song founded on those musical elements which have to do with the beauty of the tone itself. This epoch signalizes the inception of an inversion of value in the terms of Plato's above-quoted phrase, which defined the musical mentality of the Greeks: "in song the rhythm and the words are of principal importance, the tones of the least." Hence, starting with the eleventh century, the invention and diffusion of solmisation informs us that "in song the tones no longer bear a secondary importance, but a principal importance on an equality with the rhythm and words."

Even in the opening centuries of the Christian era music already took the first steps in preparation of this evolution. The *tropi* and *troparia* of liturgical chant in the Greek Church during these early times, in the form of passages or *melismata*; then the *melismata* of Ambrosian chant (fourth century); then the *tropi* and sequences of the ninth and tenth centuries handed down in the

breviaries of St. Gall; and later those hymns and sequences which gave rise to a great number of profane popular songs, to the Lauds, the Mysteries, etc.—all these were forms of expressive song.

During the centuries following the earliest ones of the Christian era we can, therefore, trace the evolution of the principle of *bel canto*—in other words, the search after the “voice beautiful,” the fascination exerted by vocal coloration, the gradual triumph of melody both in the monodic and the polyphonic style.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the *scholæ cantorum* educated children and adults in singing. In the churches the people already heard voices trained in song, and so, both in these schools and in the churches, the people learned to love singing, and individuals drawn to this art had special inducements to exercise their musical gifts by composing songs and singing them. Thus it came about that just in secular music, and more particularly in its popular branch, we can trace the development of coloristic vocal expressiveness. It was the *chants chevaleresques*, the *lais*, the *sirventes*, the *descorts*, all the various songs of the ménestrels and roving minstrels of the Middle Ages, and the lays of the troubadours of Provence, which prepared the way for the *ars nova* of the fourteenth century. And this “new art” betokened the definitive acceptance (on the part of musicians, too) of the song *a solo* as a composition of art with a pronounced predominance of lyric expression. The *caccie*, the *madrigali*, the *carole*, of the blossoming of Italian music in the fourteenth century, are compositions wherein the leading part is always taken by a free melody of an absolutely expressive character. The most noted names of this period are Giovanni da Cascia, mentioned by Filippo Villani, Pietro Cascella, the friend of Dante, and the famous Landino Degli Organi, a celebrated blind organist.

This Florentine *ars nova* is a clear assertion of Italianism as contrasted with the Parisian *ars antiqua* which had introduced the earliest forms of vocal polyphony (the *discantus*, the *cantus gemellus*, the *falso bordone*, the *motetus*)—forms which exclude simple vocal expressiveness in favor of artificial mechanical invention, assimilating the vocal organ with the sonorous mechanical agencies fabricated by the hand of man. Conserved with this *ars nova* of the fourteenth century we find a precious heritage from Greek art, namely, the employment of rhythm (which is one of the less mensurable manifestations of the artistic human psyche) as a means of expression in free forms of the widest scope. In the *ars parigina*, on the contrary, the expressive power of rhythm was threatened with emasculation through the

influence of the *musica mensuralis* in the fixed forms of the beats, in the figuration which established a fixed duration for the tones. Thus the peculiar characteristics of Italian or rather Mediterranean musical art thenceforward manifested themselves as distinct from those of foreign art.

It is of the highest importance to note how the dawn of artistic expressive song coincided with the dawn of Italian and Provençal literature, that is, of the very two languages whose distinctive characteristic, as compared with other tongues, is the melodic expressiveness of the voice. This simple statement would suffice to demonstrate the absolute dependence of the musical art and the musical spirit of a people upon their language, and this because musical art is simply and solely a necessary derivation from the voice, whether in its instinctive natural manifestation as language, or in its most elevated artistic form, poetry, developing itself through the medium of the musical elements proper to the language itself.

The musical difference between the Latin and Italian languages is at bottom the same that exists between the song of antiquity, the *canto fermo*, and the *ars nova* which essayed its first steps in Provence and Tuscany—it is a contrast found in the musical expressiveness of the voice. It is important to observe that, as the Tuscan tongue was the mother of our language, it was equally the mother of our music.

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The fifteenth century, in music as in all the arts, was a period of transition. As always happens in such periods, its enfeebled condition laid it open to the infiltration of foreign arts, which developed from germs evolved from the forms, not from the intimate essence, of Italian art. Thus, from the Florentine *caccie*, originated that art of the canon which developed in Holland, then giving rise to the imitative style, and later to the fugue. From the forms of profane composition of the *ars nova* were born the religious songs of the English and French, likewise the Spanish songs; during that period there flourished, most of all, the Flemish School of song, which in a short time succeeded in gaining possession of the Italian School.

In this fifteenth century various political events favored the foreign infiltration into Italian art, chief among them being the transference of the Popes to Avignon (the so-called Babylonian captivity of the Church) and their return to Rome with a



numerous and notable cohort of singers and musicians, in great part Flemings, who found it easy to impose their art upon the churches of Rome and Italy. But if, in this century, our native art was stifled for the time being and took refuge in the simple forms of the spontaneous folk-music (the *frottola*, the *strambotto*, the *villanella*, etc.)—just as the chaste architecture and the ingenuous paintings of that epoch conserve, in their simplicity and their genuine expressiveness, characteristics of true Italian purity in music—out of this period of rigorous repression there emerged in a few years the magnificent bloom of the Renaissance. In the sixteenth century were born Palestrina, Nannini, Anerio, Vittoria, Luca Marenzio, Gabrieli, Orazio Vecchi, all of whom, in the very polyphonic form imposed by the Flemings, maintained the sovereign might of the lyrical and emotional expression of the singing voice which is characteristic of Italian musicianship.

The regulations emanating from the Council of Trent (1545–63) with respect to sacred music were inspired, perhaps intuitively, by conceptions of purely Italian musical purity; the said regulations insisted, in fact, that the words should be so sung as to be understood. This is equivalent to proclaiming that the emotional musical potency of the human voice ought to issue from its essential elements unaltered by vicious pronunciation—which means that by their intimate interpenetration words and music ought mutually to enhance their expressive power. This came to be a necessary consequence of that entire trend of Italian music from the eleventh century onward towards that principle which we claim to be fundamental in and characteristic of *bel canto*, namely, the quest of beauty and purity of vocal tone in its highest degree—a conception which, during the course of the sixteenth century, was asserting itself in practice, took on a definitive form in the seventeenth, and finally attained to full and complete development in the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth. And the like principle was, of necessity, destined to spread throughout all branches of instrumental technique. So we arrive at the conclusion, that the qualities inherent in musical beauty of tone form the prime, indispensable condition for an artistic production. From this axiom (as we venture to term it) were derived all those consequences of the didactic and practical tendencies which characterize the methods of singing and instruction in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, besides all the methods, even the modern ones, of instrumental teaching. The human organ which produces or causes the production of the most beautiful tone possible, functions well in conformity

with the plan of natural law; by training that organ, from the beginning, for the production of the most beautiful tone, there was achieved a successful feat not only of artistic education but also of technical education, because it was only by means of such continuous correct functioning that the organ was strengthened, attained equilibrium in its peculiar operations, and gradually and naturally acquired all the qualities necessary for obtaining the most potent musical effects.

The so greatly vaunted, and by many regarded as mysterious, secret of the singing-methods and teachings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is nothing more than the consistent observance of this simple and all-important precept, from which these methods and that period of artistic blossomtime actually derived the appellation of "bel canto"—the search after beautiful tone under the guidance and inspiration of the conceptions of purest art.

During the sixteenth century, therefore, the seed sown in the preceding ages developed in rapid and luxuriant growth. The quest of *bel canto* on the part of singers and musicians contributed to an ever wider diffusion of a love for this art among the elect of the populace, who, amid the renaissance of all literary and artistic culture, felt a new and stronger esthetic urge. Beside the courts of princes, in the houses of wealthy and noble patrician families, in the sumptuous churches everywhere in process of erection, good music and good singers were sought for. Love of art in musicians and their wealthy patrons, the ambition of princes and lords, the lust of gold among professionals, all combined in this epoch of renaissance to give a powerful impulse to our art and to produce a great number of admirable singers and teachers.

But, as always happens in periods of great activity, together with the chosen spirits who observed the immutable laws of equilibrium and good taste in their artistic productions, there was to be found the multitudinous throng of professionals endowed with slender artistic talents, who were disposed, by dint of incessant cultivation, to make technique the ultimate goal of their profession, so that virtuosity in their case came to have an excessive preponderance over the purely artistic virtues of expressive song. The lyrical expression of the emotions through the medium of the perfected musical powers of the voice had no allurements for this throng of mediocre artists, for, being unable to stir the feelings of their hearers, they sought to fascinate them, and the means for exerting such fascination was—*agility*. By patient practice in the lightening of their vocal emission, the

singers finally acquired that precious accomplishment which they called the *gorgia*, i.e., the art of making *gorgheggi* (passages and trills), wherewith they prodigally adorned every kind of music as they listed. It was a species of improvisation which the soloist (usually a soprano and generally a man) indulged in during the execution of a piece. The melody written by the author, and frequently even the formal lines of plainsong, served as canvasses on which the singer embroidered his *gorgheggi*. For the long notes of the melody the singer substituted a passage, or run, of "agility." This artifice was termed "diminution," and the art of diminution constituted one of the most important parts of the practice and technique of singing at that time. It may be imagined to what lengths of artistic profanation this excessive liberty went when left to the ingenuity of these virtuose singers!

In madrigals in several parts the soprano soloist, while the others sang their parts as written, displayed his vocal fireworks to the extent of his ability; when singing a solo aria with instrumental accompaniment, he allowed himself every liberty. This style of singing was called *canto figurato* in contrast to the *canto fermo* of liturgical music.

But while singers by trade misused their virtuosity in these excesses, and alongside of the throng of mediocrities and ciphers, there were many rare artists, both composers and singers, who pressed forward unswervingly on the path of true and lofty art. The expressiveness of melody became more and more potent in its manifestation. We may affirm, that the entire art of the sixteenth century is dominated by the search after melodic expression in song. Although singers in general strove to perfect themselves in florid vocalism, many of them did not neglect to master the art of expressing emotions by the color of the voice, by the charm of their accents, by the most exquisite vocal modulations.

Individual song progressed with long strides and spread further and further, gaining a decisive preponderance over vocal polyphony. The "new aria, grateful to the ears" (*nuova aria et grata alle orecchie*)—as Vincenzo Giustiniani, a writer toward the close of the sixteenth century, says in his "Discorso sopra la musica de' suoi tempi"—was the melody now predominant in all compositions; such melodies were "new" by reason of their great expressiveness, and made themselves "grateful to the ears" not merely by means of exquisite melodic invention, but by the numerous and unanticipated florid ornamentations which the virtuosi lavished upon them. Indeed, Padre Zacconi, a theorist

of repute at the end of the sixteenth century, writes that "the embellishments and accents are made by splitting and breaking up the figures (the *diminutions*), every time that in a beat or half-beat there is added a quantity of notes whose peculiarity resides in their swift delivery; the which afford so great pleasure and delight that one might fancy he was listening to so many well-trained birds that with their song enravishe the heart and leave us in the end well content with their singing. Those among them who have so great readiness and skill in the delivery *a tempo* of such showers of notes with such rapidity, have made and make the *cantilene* so lovely, that now whoever does not sing like them gives slight satisfaction to the hearers and is but lightly esteemed by the singers."

Such, then, was the art of song when the sixteenth century ended: A delicate and exquisite expressiveness of melody, achieved by simple and instinctive means not refined by special technical training, which latter aimed almost exclusively at perfecting the *gorgia*, attaining this through constant lightness of emission, by the execution of vocal flourishes, trills and passages;—an ever increasing diffusion, especially in the profane style, of songs for a solo voice;—a continuous intensification of expression of the melody in the madrigals and polyphonic or, rather, polymelodic compositions.

Here, then, we find the inception of *bel canto*, of which we have sought, in the preceding, to offer a brief synthetic view.

At this time, toward the end of the sixteenth century and at the beginning of the seventeenth, appears the Roman Giulio Caccini. He coördinated, perfected, and carried over into the field of professional artistry the results of the progress made in vocal art during the sixteenth century. He wrote a collection of "Nuove Musiche ad una voce sola," preceded by an Introduction which constitutes the most important document thitherto published concerning the technique of singing. With him the era of *bel canto* is considered to begin, both as a practical art and in the methods of teaching. The vague and uncertain generalizations of the sixteenth century, the fruit of individual empirical experiment rather than of reasoned practical and artistic research, were not only regulated by him, but amplified; he is one of the most authoritative representatives of the reaction, already in progress, against the degeneration of the virtuosity of the *gorgheggianti*. The principle of lightness of vocal emission, which had been used for the purpose of perfecting and maintaining the agility of the voice, he adopts as fundamental, though not merely

for the attainment of that purpose, but chiefly for arriving at a far more important goal—namely, purity of tone and flexibility of the voice, in both timbre and intensity, by means of the *accents* and their musical expansion or augmentation, these being the *exclamations*, the *note filate* (sustained tones), the *messa di voce*, all serving to attain what was then called the *affetti*, that is to say, expressiveness.

The principles enunciated by Caccini rapidly gained the upper hand during the first half of the seventeenth century. Pietro Della Valle, in an essay entitled “Della Musica nell’età nostra,” published in 1640, contrasting the singers of that period with those of the sixteenth century, writes: “Therefore all these latter, beyond trills and passages, and a good placing of the voice [i.e., besides agility and a good emission], had in their singing practically nothing further in the art of *piano* and *forte*, of increasing the tone gradually and decreasing it gracefully, of the expression of the *affetti*, of tastefully reinforcing the words and their meanings, of giving the voice a joyous or melancholy cast, of making it plaintive or bold as required, and of other similar embellishments (*galanterie*) which singers nowadays do excellently well, but in those times had not been thought out.”

These remarks of Pietro Della Valle clearly summarize the characteristics of lyrical and expressive song in the seventeenth century as contrasted with that of the sixteenth, which was frequently nakedly musical, florid, and a matter of vocal technique.

While the reaction against mere florid technique was a violent one, it was still not so strong as to abolish completely that mode of vocal execution, and this is comprehensible when we consider that these forms were musical reflexes and aspects of the ever-increasing movement in social life. After the reposeful middle ages, of which we plainly perceive a reflex in the immobile *canto fermo*, music continuously reflects the growing movement in the life of mankind, primarily in the growing mobility of the new tonalities then coming into being, that is, in the transformation of the horizontal forms of the Gregorian modes into the modern tonalities, and, more especially in the definition and establishment of that major mode which is the characteristic type of ascending motion; also of the minor type inherited from the earliest ancient modes with their descending trend (those of the Greeks);—in the progress of tonal modulation, of chromaticism, etc. When, towards the end of the sixteenth century, the transformation of tonality was approaching its definitive conclusion, the vigorous movement of the Renaissance, manifested in the consummate

ability of the great architects, painters, sculptors and writers of that epoch, found in polyphonic music and the contrapuntal forms its natural reflex of motivity; on the other hand, it displayed itself through individual solo song under the above forms of agility in the "diminutions," passages, and florid singing in general. Song tended, little by little, to express its motive characteristics by means of the tones themselves, especially in sustained tones, in accents, in rhythm.

The principle of the *exclamation* and the *messa di voce* as employed in expressive music, so well explained by Caccini in his treatise and so well applied in his "Musiche," was not a new principle, for in the sixteenth century, before this time, we find traces and instances of those styles. The novelty of his application consists in the substitution of his principle of movement for the movement of the passages of agility, and in particular in building up on them the expressiveness of the singing. He laid down the precept, to begin with, that when the expression demands it one ought to execute a *messa di voce* or an exclamation on every half-note or dotted quarter-note in descending, but only the *messa di voce* on the semibreves—a principle which, from that time through the entire period of *bel canto* (that is, till towards the middle of the last century), held sway over vocal music.

However, in spite of all these precepts by Caccini and his contemporaries, which tended to substitute the movement in the tone itself for the movement of the tones rapidly following each other in passages of agility, the use of *floriture* and diminutions had not been completely done away with in the seventeenth century. Caccini himself, a singer and singing-teacher, could not all at once break with tradition and renounce all that had hitherto been called "the chiefest ornament of the singer," and so we see that he still retains in many of his compositions and in his method of singing and instruction a large portion of the ideas and traditions of his time. In the Preface to his "Nuove Musiche" he seeks to vindicate himself before the connoisseurs and reformers as to how and when he introduces passages; but the fact that he does not completely abolish such passages, even in expressive song, demonstrates that in him the virtuoso still had a slight preponderance over the composer. The employment of the diminutions was still in vogue during the first half of the seventeenth century; it was only the singer's liberty of inventing and introducing them which gradually underwent limitation, because the composers were themselves predetermining the passages in their compositions, introducing them where their refined artistic taste adjudged

them most appropriate. So the singers were instructed, not so much to compose them as to execute them. Consequently, in the first half of the seventeenth century, we meet with a considerable number of sacred and secular compositions which served for study and as models for students of singing, and which were intended rather to cultivate the good taste of the student than to encourage him (as was the case in the sixteenth century) in the abuse of the *floriture*. Hence, in such compositions, expressive singing on prolonged tones was intelligently ordered, though it found wider scope in secular works, in short ariettas for room-music in a light or sentimental style, which not only professional singers, but also dilettanti of refined taste, were in the habit of performing to their own accompaniment on the lute, or the clavicembalo, or some other instrument then in use. In these simple and unpretentious compositions the purely melodic conception based the expressiveness of the melody on the movements of the voice upon prolonged tones, on the accents, and particularly on the rhythmic elasticity. Caccini, in his collection of arias for solo voice, furnishes us with the finest examples of these simple songs, and his Introduction to that work provides valuable hints for their execution.

With regard to the then proclaimed necessity of maintaining, in expressive song, a certain rhythmic freedom, or rather an artistic rhythmical elasticity, we may remark that Caccini—who, like all the members of the Florentine *camerata*, studied and investigated the modes wherein the art found manifestation among the ancient Greeks—tells us that, as with the Greeks the expressiveness of the word in its natural rhythm was required to govern the tones of the voice (he cites, indeed, Plato's assertion that "music is naught else than language and rhythm, with tone then added, and not the other way about"), so also in the music of his time expression should be sought through the free rhythm of the sung word, combining therewith, however, all the resources of melodic and coloristic expression at the command of the voice, which were unknown to the Greeks. He terms this mode of interpretation the "noble manner which is employed without strict observance of the prescribed measure, frequently reducing the value of the notes by one-half, in accord with the meaning of the words, whence is derived the so-called *canto in sprezzatura* [literally, "songs in disregard"].

We have already observed that the two art-forms characteristic of singing in the seventeenth century, the same which permitted of a brief definition of the art of *bel canto*, were the aria

for solo voice, and the recitative style. We know that the inception of this novel style, which was also called *il recitar cantando*<sup>1</sup> [the sung recitation], was due to the reformers of the Florentine *camerata*, and applied to the earliest manifestations of that new form of theatrical representation known as the Melodrama. The first productions in that style were dry and conventional; but speedily the melodic expressiveness of the voice through the medium of the accents, the rhythm, the inflexions of intensity and color, made their way into it, as well. This declamatory style presented the phenomenon of a most energetic reaction against the abuses of virtuosity by the singers of the sixteenth century, and had a noteworthy influence on the development of musical art. One of the most illustrious representatives of this new style was Claudio Monteverdi, one of the grandest figures in seventeenth-century art; he opened new horizons for the scope of instrumental music in Opera, and was the precursor of our modern art in the employment of harmony. In singing he was the most authoritative representative of powerful and austere musical declamation completely denuded of florid ornamentation.

However, this recitative style born at the outset of the seventeenth century, although inspired by the genius of Monteverdi, could not maintain itself for long under its original forms. *Arie chiuse* were very soon interpolated among the recitatives, and from the fusion of the melodic style with the recitative style arose the characteristic form of the monologues in which the song is a mingling of musical declamation and expressive melody arabesqued here and there with passages which, like the volutes and florid ornamentations of the baroque style, enrich with superb phantasy the grandiose lines of the musical composition. Marco da Gagliano, Antonio Cesti, Luigi Rossi and others have bequeathed us splendid models of these compositions.

Alongside of the predominant monodic music, we also find an interesting development of polyphonic music in this century. The madrigal of the sixteenth century continues its existence in the seventeenth, but in a form far simpler and more melodic, more ariose. These forms of songs and madrigals, for the most part accompanied by the sound of instruments, were frequently employed as intermezzi in the operas, and found lodgement, more particularly, in those forms of secular art (chamber-music of a worldly character) which were called cantatas, executed by one or more solo singers and a limited number of musicians, the

<sup>1</sup>Angelo Grillo (1608) formulated the innovation still more explicitly by calling it "un cantar senza canto, un cantar recitativo."—*Ed.*



peculiar ornament of sumptuous receptions at the houses of lords and princes. The frivolous life of the mundane atmosphere of the period is mirrored in these compositions, sometimes replete with enchanting grace, with airy passion, sometimes imbued with exquisite poetic sentiment; and also in these lighter forms of art, *bel canto* becomes more and more firmly established.

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Such, then, were the beginnings of the art of *bel canto*.

With Alessandro Scarlatti at the close of the seventeenth century, and with the divine Pergolesi at the commencement of the eighteenth, *bel canto* truly enters into its period of fullest bloom, which continues its uninterrupted upward course until Bellini, who marks the final stage in the path of the glorious school, and who represents, with his works of purest Italianism, a perfect synthesis of all the characteristics of *bel canto*. This author, in his melodies, his recitatives, his declamation, offers the expert singer the means of exploiting all the most potent effects that the art of *bel canto* can afford; and human emotions find their most powerful medium of expression in these simple melodies, in these inspired musical revelations, whereby the voice in sovereign supremacy transports the hearer to the limits of artistic ecstasy.

(Translated by Theodore Baker.)